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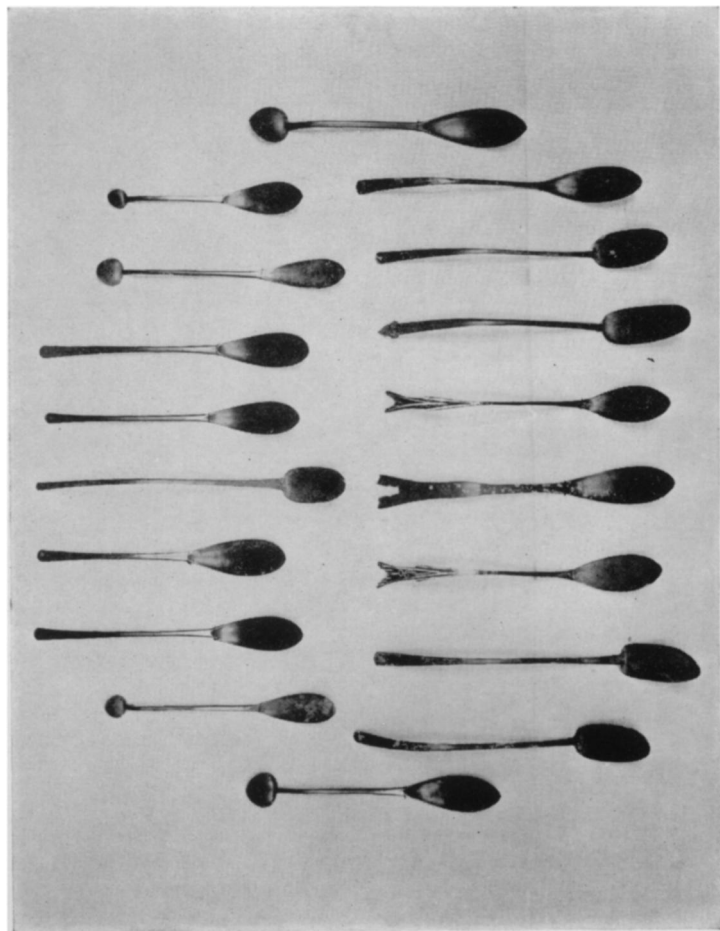
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Korean Bronze Spoons of the Korai Dynasty (A.D. 936-1392)
The Worcester R. Warner Collection, The Cleveland Museum of Art

THE BULLETIN OF THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

KOREAN BRONZE SPOONS OF THE KORAI DYNASTY

Aside from Buddhist statues, the bronzes of early Korea are of comparatively simple form and scantily decorated. Their main interest lies in grace of outline and in the color and satin-like patina which is produced by long contact with the chemicals in the earth.

On the peninsula nothing in bronze has been found to compare in elaboration of workmanship and design with the Chinese ceremonial vessels of the Chow, Han and T'ang dynasties. And yet, so far as beauty of surface goes, few Chinese bronzes are as perfect as even the common run of those from Korea. Either because of something peculiar in the alloy or because of certain water-borne agents in the Korean soils, "mirror black" patinas and robin's-egg blue surfaces are not uncommon. Malachite is sometimes found, and an occasional spot of red, but these colors occur less often than on the Chinese burial bronzes.

The lesser bronzes of the Korai dynasty (A.D. 936-1392) which are found in the graves, consist as a rule in mirrors, toilet-boxes, pins, hair-pins, buckles, chop-sticks, and spoons. All these types, unlike the grave-pottery which has been found in the same graves, seem to have been actually used by the living before being buried for the convenience of the dead in their next life.

The Museum is now exhibiting a series of bronze spoons of the Korai period, which illustrates well the range of shapes that has been found. It includes several double-ended ones, a form seldom seen, which up to now has not been represented in our American museums.

The high arched stems and tapering bowls suggest at once an origin in horn, transferred without much modification into metal. Similar shapes made from the horns of mountain sheep and goats are to be found to-day among the tribes on the American side of the Pacific basin, and are particularly well illustrated by some of the simpler forms used by the Alaskan Indians. Although other parallels are easy to find on the Pacific basin littoral and even further afield, there is at present small reason for thinking them either prototypes or copies or evidence of racial kinship in their makers.

Metal spoons in the Shosoin, the treasure house of the Todaiji monastery at Nara, Japan, are quite of this Korean form and are probably not far from contemporary with those under discussion, although they are not among the objects mentioned in the original inventory of A. D. 787. That they represent a form once common in Japan, or originating there, is doubtful. Their very presence in that storehouse suggests that they were exotic, as was perhaps eighty per cent of the household furniture and treasures of art which were vowed to the temple by the Emperor Shomu (A. D. 724-748). If this is true, then there are no spoon forms, known to be indigenous to China or Japan, which can be demonstrated as prototypes of these from Korea. For the shell and wood spatulas and ladles which were early used by the Japanese could hardly have suggested the graceful horn curves illustrated here. The earliest spoons that have come down to us in China are bronze ladles from the Chow dynasty and pottery ones generally attributed to the Han, but the first seem merely little pots on stems and the latter shallow scoops which might have been whittled from wood.

In technique, these grave-spoons from Korea are unlike the common run of Oriental bronzes in that they were never cast in a mold, but always beaten out of flat metal and then scraped with a sharp object to obtain the requisite thinness. The third process was polishing with stone or stone dust. Finally, certain ones were probably gilded, although traces of gilt are rare among the specimens which have been discovered. The whole process (except the gilding) can be well studied in the small collection recently put on exhibition. We lack specimens of silver and gold, but nearly the whole gamut of shapes seems to be represented.

It will be noticed that there are, in the main, three general types; one with a long oval bowl, high arch and plain or fish-tail handle, which is the most common; the second with more or less clearly defined shoulders to the oval bowl; and the third, extremely rare, which has a secondary smaller bowl attached to the handle-end of the stem.

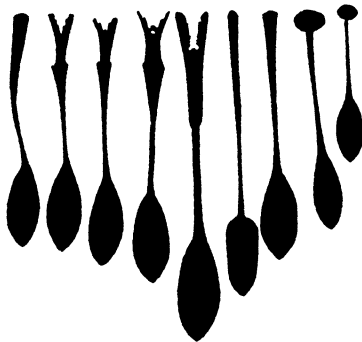
Chop-sticks, of which we have several examples, are for the most part slender cylinders of hammered bronze, more or less modified by being tapered or made square or hexagonal in cross-section, according to the fancy of the craftsman. A few are grooved with notches, evidently to suggest the splinter of bam-

boo from which the common chop-sticks were and are formed. Their sole claim to exhibition among objects of æsthetic interest is the fact that they often acquired an adventitious beauty of color and surface.

Concerning the date of the examples in this collection, little can be said. The only known fact concerning them is that they were dug from graves in Songdo (Kaijo), in Northern Korea. These tombs, cist-burials and simple graves, all date from a time prior to A. D. 1392, when the dynastic capital was transferred to Seoul (Keijo), under the Kings of Ri. Whether any of the specimens in the group date from as early as the year A. D. 936, when the Korai dynasty was founded, is doubtful. The amount of scientific excavation that has been done in Songdo is small, and the only material procurable by foreign museums is unfortunately the result of unscrupulous grave-robbery on the part of Japanese dealers and their native agents. Fortunately for all of us, the Japanese government has now put a stop to this illicit trade, and through its own archæologists is amassing a large body of information which is rapidly becoming available.

Perhaps in another year the officials of the Japanese Archæological Survey may be able to give us a history of the development of these bronze spoons, which will warrant the attribution of an approximate date to each of the different forms. Also it is to be hoped that they may settle the question of the origin of this shape, whether it was borrowed from the mainland or whether it was indeed truly Korean.

L. W.



Korean Bronze Spoons of the Korai Dynasty (A. D. 936-1392)
In the Seoul Museum, Korea